

Neuro-nontypicality: the background to this morning's p...

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I do not apologise for the length of the post that I have published today, analysing [an article in the Financial Times](#) discussing the prevalence of both autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and so-called attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

As is, no doubt, apparent from my analysis, the article made me angry, and I make no apology for that anger. I think it is wholly justified.

I should make clear that I do not have a diagnosis for either of these conditions, or for them in combination, which is now commonly called AuDHD. That does not prevent me from suspecting that I do have both. However, at my stage in life, I am not sure that having a diagnosis would be a good use of NHS time, or of my personal funds, although I do know those of my age for whom a diagnosis would be of benefit.

That said, what I should also be clear about is that I do know quite a number of bright, impressive, personable and very obviously intelligent young people whom I have met in a variety of situations, who have admitted to having one, the other, or both of these conditions. For them, without exception, diagnosis has been massively important because it has helped them understand just why it is that they do not fit the stereotype that is supposedly required of them. When they understand that there is a mismatch between how they think and how the rest of the world thinks, it is as if a lightbulb goes on. They are no longer at fault. They no longer have to keep asking what is wrong with them.

Understanding that there are others who think as they do, why they think as they do, and why they respond in ways that others observe as differing from the norm, is critical to their self-development as people who can embrace themselves as they are, which in most cases they have not been able to do by the time they discover their diagnosis, often after nearly two decades in an education system seemingly designed to alienate them in every way possible.

My own realisation has been important to me, but it has been a gradual process, and not a light bulb one. However, I well recall, in a not unrelated way, my discovery on a

course that I was reluctantly persuaded to take part in several decades ago that I was profoundly introverted in the Jungian sense, and that this meant that everything I was trying to do in my career at that moment was always going to be a profound struggle for me, however successful I might appear to be.

I was suddenly told that there was a personality type that looked inward for a source of motivation, and that intuition rather than sensation mattered more to me, but not to others, whilst the fact that thinking took precedence over feeling for me was a valid, but not true of everyone.

Three things became clear:

- * My life experience was inherently different to that of some other people.
- * This did not mean there was anything wrong with me: I was just different.
- * I happened to be in a decided minority as a consequence of what I discovered, but this was not a problem if I also understood that there was nothing wrong with others having different ways of thinking and so priorities to me.
- * The task was to understand the differences and to then use them to best effect in life.

What I stress is that my discovery that I was an INTJ on the Myers-Briggs model was revelatory, even though it was just labelling using a model, and not a diagnosis. My subsequent change in direction in life, which happened just after I was 40, can in no small part be explained by that new understanding, so significant was it. Suddenly, a great deal made sense to me, although it is still the case that I am told by some people with whom I share this that there is no way on earth that I am an introvert, which shows just how prejudiced people who have not bothered to find out what having that personality type means can really be.

What I also know is that the same revelatory experience happens for many of those who are liberated by realising what their true selves are when ASD, ADHD, or both are explained to them. Going through the process of discovering whether they have these conditions leaves them seeing themselves and their world in a totally different way. Once they understand, they then have a chance. Until then, they are, in effect, left in the dark, struggling, subject to prejudice, and without hope of understanding why they find everything so difficult.

And that is why I am angry. [The article the FT published](#) was based on what I consider to be extremely poor statistical analysis that suggested resources might be misallocated and that overdiagnosis is taking place, when the exact opposite is almost certainly true.

The suggestion was made within that article, in my opinion, that some people might be

using diagnosis to secure social advantage. I am appalled that a paper like the FT might publish such a suggestion. What this reveals, in my view, is a prejudice on the part of those who choose not to understand what having these conditions means, or how those who have them suffer because they live in a world designed by and for neurotypical people in which their agency is, quite extraordinarily, denied and not just by individuals but by systematic intent.

That suffering does not arise from the conditions themselves. There is, after all, nothing “wrong” with people with any of these conditions. They can, in fact, be decidedly life-affirming if a person is allowed to embrace who they really are. The suffering arises because of the prejudices imposed upon them by those who do not have these conditions. Those without them often demand conformity to ways of behaviour that are abnormal, incomprehensible and stressful to those who do have them. As a result, people with these conditions are forced to learn how to tackle that prejudice. This typically involves continual masking of their own true nature. The stress of doing so is enormous, and it carries a high risk of burnout and breakdown. All of this persists because prejudice against those who do not think in a standard fashion is deemed acceptable by society.

I know a bit about this, too. If I go back to the incomprehension people suggest they have about my being an introvert, this is frequently stated as an outright contradiction. They say, “No, you’re not”. I would hope these days that no one would say “No, you’re not” if someone imparted that they thought themselves gay, lesbian, bi, queer or trans. But apparently, it remains quite acceptable to say to someone they are not an introvert, or not AuDHD, or whatever else they might know themselves to be, denying their whole lived existence as a result. And yes, I am angry that this is apparently acceptable in our society.

In this context, I do, at the very least, call the FT’s publication of this article grossly irresponsible. At worst, it is outright discrimination.

And yes, I am very, very angry about that, because I know millions in this country think differently, and there is nothing whatsoever wrong with them as a result. But they do need that difference to be recognised, they do need to enjoy educational support to fit into a system that is otherwise not designed for them, and they may well need understanding within the workplace rather than prejudice of this sort. If the absence of that support, or even of the need for it is not a cause for anger, I do not know what is.

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